

Five Things to Look for in Job Candidates

A bachelor's degree in accounting, proficiency in Microsoft Excel, five or more years of experience, strong quantitative and analytical skills, and a tax background. All of these are common requirements for a senior accountant position. But the right person for this job, or any other in accounting,

needs more than technical abilities. As a hiring manager, you need to find the most qualified candidate.

If your company is like others these days, you have more work to accomplish and fewer employees to manage it all. There's no budget or time to waste on poor hiring decisions. When you're filling a vacancy, you need to find someone who can step into the role, make an immediate impact, and thrive in your corporate culture. This makes it critical to take into account the whole picture when assessing applicants—sometimes weighing factors that may be challenging to evaluate based solely on a résumé or interview. Often the best person for the position may lack some technical expertise but have other qualities that make him or her the ideal candidate.

1 **Honesty and integrity**

Recent scandals brought the issue of business ethics to the forefront of the corporate world, particularly within accounting and finance departments. Resulting legislation, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, instituted new rules to encourage ethical financial practices. While these regulations provide a framework for proper activity, the central element to success is sound judgment. You need employees who can be counted on in any situation, big or small.

In a recent survey commissioned by our company, 58%

of chief financial officers polled said the qualities that impress them most about job candidates, aside from willingness and ability to do the job, are honesty and integrity. That's up from 26% in 1997.

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So, how can you identify potential employees who possess these qualities? When managed correctly, the interviewing process can yield valuable insights. Here are some useful questions to consider:

- What would you do if you suspected someone in a position of authority in the company was falsifying

accounting data?

- Have you ever encountered any unethical behavior at work or school? If so, how did you respond?
- While reviewing some six-month-old accounts receivables files, you discover that a client overpaid your company by \$100. What do you do?

Verifying information through reference checking can also give you a better sense of an individual's commitment to honesty and integrity. Someone who lies or stretches the truth during the interview process is likely to exhibit the same behavior at work.

2 Enthusiasm

You can often gauge an individual's level of interest in the job opening and your company just by reading the cover letter. There should be evidence the candidate researched your organization and an explanation why he or she is a good match to the opportunity.

Also take note of how an applicant responds to interview questions. Does the candidate seem to light up when discussing his or her work as an accountant? Keep in mind that someone may be good at what they do—a whiz with Oracle systems, for instance—but not enjoy the job. Often this comes across clearly when you ask applicants what they like best and least about their work. Another positive indicator is when you receive a thank-you note promptly after the interview that restates interest in the position.

An enthusiastic attitude can mean the difference between an employee who shows up to the office each day and just fulfills the basic requirements and one who exceeds expectations.

3 Commitment to the profession

Take a look toward the bottom of most résumés, and you'll find useful information. This is where many people list their accounting certifications or affiliations with industry associations.

While an accreditation or involvement in groups such as the Institute of Management Accountants doesn't guarantee an individual is a good employee, it does show a commitment to the profession. Accountants who take proactive steps to keep their skills and expertise up-to-date are more likely to have the knowledge you need at just the right time.

4 Strong work history

In previous years you may have looked for a record of promotions or extended tenure with past employers, but in today's challenging business environment these considerations may be beyond an individual's control. Budget cuts frequently limit advancement opportunities and lead to layoffs, even for top performers.

Instead, place greater emphasis on a candidate's accomplishments on the job. For example, did she help the information technology department identify ways to reduce its expenditures? Did she lead a successful reorganization of the accounting and finance teams while maintaining the groups' morale and productivity? Did she still meet annual department objectives despite having fewer staff members to support the efforts?

5 Adaptability

A flexible mind-set is a valuable trait in potential employees. You want people on your team who can adjust quickly to changing

business conditions and work demands.

Ask candidates to cite examples of projects they may have helped with that went beyond the job description. Someone who voluntarily stayed late to help a colleague with a financial report or assisted a vice president with some last-minute research, for instance, is a team player and is likely to adapt well to new responsibilities.

A hiring strategy that assesses skills requirements as well as these factors will enable you to select better prospective employees. Evaluate all applicants objectively, making sure you're not so impressed with one qualification—such as hard-to-find cost accounting expertise—that you disregard other important considerations. With a balanced approach, you'll make more effective staffing decisions and create an accounting team capable of addressing current and future demands. ■

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